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Williams, B. Lyon

Mediate suffrage

Southampton

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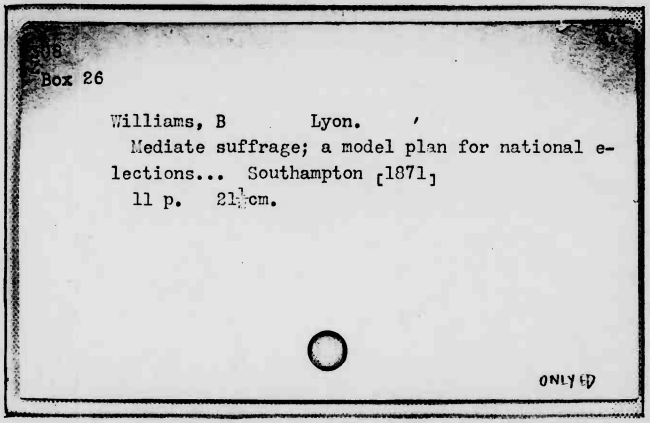

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MEDIATE SUFFRAGE:

A MODEL PLAN FOR NATIONAL ELECTIONS.

BY

B. LYON WILLIAMS,

AUTHOR OF "SCIENCE OF MEMORY," ETC.

"Quod verum atque decens curo et rogo, et omnis in hoc sum."—HORACE.

"What right, what true, what fit we justly call,
Let this be all our care, for this is all."—POPE.

PUBLISHED BY

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MEDIATE SUFFRAGE.

"When clouds are seen, wise men put on their cloaks;
When great leaves fall, then winter is at hand;
When the sun sets, who doth not look for night;
Untimely storms make men expect a dearth:
All may be well; but, if God sort it so,
'Tis more than we deserve or may expect."—
SHAKSPEARE, *King Richard III.*

"Therefore doth heaven divide
The state of man in divers functions,
Setting endeavour in continual motion;
To which is fixed, as an aim or butt,
Obedience; for so work the honey bees;
Creatures that, by a rule in nature, teach
The act of order to a peopled kingdom."—
IBID, *King Henry V.*

ONE of the most difficult problems which the statesman now encounters is, by what means the legitimate aspirations of the great mass of the populations for a voice in the selection of representatives to the Legislature, can be harmonised with order, good government, and stability for the institutions of the country. Events are daily tending to revolutionise the political aspect of society. We are entering a huge maelstrom, the vortex of which is revolution, change, anarchy; and there seems no means by which the force of the eddy can be withstood, by which the barque of the State can be guided into the safer current of order and intellectual progress in social and national development.

Legislation, and the present march of ideas and events (as we see both at home and abroad) concur to promote the concentration of political power in the lowest stratum of society, and in the hands of those least adapted to wield it for the general welfare of the country and the fair interests of all. The poor man has rights as well as the rich man, and the rich man as the poor one; the merchant as well as the mechanic, and the peasant as well as the farmer. Legislation, then, should have due regard for the rights of all. Yet, if the suffrage be given to the multitude, legislators will be sent to Parliament who will mainly represent class interests, and who will court popularity by pandering to the feelings of the constituents, with only a secondary regard for the highest interests of the country.

The demand of the masses who pay their proportion of the taxes, and otherwise have to bear their share of the burdens of the State, to have a voice in the choice of representatives is both natural and legitimate, and cannot be permanently resisted. On the other hand, the proposition is self-evident that the great bulk of the people, though they should be allowed some voice in the choice of representatives to the legislature; and though they may have clear and tolerably correct ideas as to the most suitable persons to represent their individual notions and interests, yet they are necessarily quite unqualified to pronounce as to the best persons to sit in Parliament to make just and equal laws, to remove abuses, to guard the interests of the Empire, to provide for the contingencies which are constantly arising, to husband the resources of the Empire, to promote the welfare of the various classes and to render their interests as little antagonistic as possible; to explore the immediate future, and to see and provide for the dangers which may threaten; to facilitate the development, prosperity, and

happiness of the communities; to watch over the progress and interests of the numerous colonies and dependencies; to conserve the dignity of the State, and to hand down to each succeeding generation an increasingly valuable legacy. As it requires the experienced eye of a connoisseur to determine the best gem among a number of stones, so it requires the educated and discerning eye to select the man with refinement, ability, elevated sentiments, knowledge, and patriotism necessary for legislators to possess, to enable them to act for the greatest present and prospective good of the country.

Though the artizan, the labourer, the peasant, and the mass of the various classes, feel that they are entitled in common justice to have a voice in the State, still the patriotism and intelligence of the bulk of them, in calm moments when uninfluenced by passion and party or popular cries, would lead them to avow that they were not sufficiently qualified for the great duty and high responsibility which we have seen, and would at the same time impel them to repudiate the suggestion that they desired more power than is good to preserve the equilibrium of the classes, and to carry out the great purposes of our national legislation which we have named.

The country requires that political power should be all powerful for good, and powerless for ill, and that it should not represent (at most but very faintly) the passions, excitements, and the necessary comparative ignorance and short-sightedness of the multitude. While the basis of political power should primarily be the people in its broadest sense, in order to possess contented populations, still that the power may be wielded to produce the greatest good for the country with the minimum of ill, and in order that intelligence and patriotism should not be swamped by ignorance and selfishness, it should undergo a form of purification as do the crude

metallic substances in order to eliminate the base elements, as the purgation of water in the filter, and as the processes of the chemist to obtain the purest residues.

The following plan would fulfil the purpose we require, and would be a species of sifting, or an elicitation of the best particles from the crude mass. Instead of the full, untempered and unrestrained tide of public opinion being immediately directed to the election of representatives, it should be directed to the selection of those who might be considered best qualified to elect representatives, and to whom the duty should be entrusted.

1. The constituencies should be divided into lists of one hundred voters, who should be required to select a person to represent them as an *elector* for the Member of Parliament.

2. The constituencies to remain as at present, or otherwise as Parliament should direct.

3. At the termination of each year, when the population is most stationary, it should be the duty of each constituency to make out a list of those who were entitled to vote in it, copies of such lists to be exhibited in public.

4. The qualifications should be :—

(a.) A male adult of sane mind, able to read and write, who had resided during the six previous months within the boundary of the constituency.

(b.) An adult male or female (spinster or widow) of sane mind, &c., who should possess landed or house property, paying rates within the boundary.

(c.) An adult female (spinster or widow), of sane mind, &c., who should hold any property within the constituency upon which she had paid rates during the previous six months.

(d.) No one to vote while in receipt of parochial relief, or while his or her affairs were in bankruptcy.

(e.) First committal to prison would disentitle a person to vote for three years after the expiration of the term of imprisonment. On the second committal to prison the right to vote should be forfeited until the person was able to produce conclusive evidence to the Magistrates, and received a certificate from two or more of them, attesting that during a period of five years, subsequent to the second release, the said person appeared to have lived honestly and soberly.

5. The division of the voters into *hundreds* should be with as much regard as possible to the circumscription of their localities. Lists of these *hundreds* should be issued gratuitously, one for each voter for each election. The list should include the names, residences, and assigned occupations of the voters. After the hundreds should have been made up and arranged, the odd voters should be divided as fairly as possible among the hundreds, and as far as practicable making the *hundreds* to conclude with an odd number.

6. No person to have more than one vote for the same constituency.

7. At the end of the year each voter should be requested to vote for an *elector* for his *hundred*, and should be supplied with a form, in which he should write in ink the name, &c., of the person whom he voted for as an *elector*. The voting paper should be duly witnessed by another voter, and should be sent in or posted (free) to the Auditors. There should be a notice on the form that any attempt to interfere with the elector's vote, or to make any stipulation equivalent to a restriction thereon, would involve the cancelling of the voter's paper.

8. The person who receives the highest number of valid votes from a given hundred, on his production of evidence of himself being a voter in some constituency, and having given the necessary information so that those who may have attempted to impose upon him any restriction in the free exercise of his vote as an elector, might have their voting papers cancelled, should be proclaimed by the sheriff, or other returning officer, as the *elector* for that 100.

9. A person elected for more than one *hundred* should have the option of deciding for which *hundred* he would serve. The person occupying the second position in the result of the voting might fairly be allowed to take the vacant office.

10. The *electors*, after having had their elections scrutinised, and been declared elected, should be bound over on oath (or affirmation equivalent to an oath) to take his part in the election of a member of Parliament, and to give his vote conscientiously and wholly uninfluenced by his voters, for the good of the constituency, and, as far as he was aware, for the best interests of the country.

11. Should there be a "tie," or duplicate result in the voting for an *elector*, and an equal number of votes be given for two or more persons, the returning officer would declare the election incomplete, and order another appeal. If the second appeal should fail of satisfactory result, the returning officer should again remit the decision to the voters, and on this occasion they should be required to elect an *arbiter* from among the voters, who, on the occasion of the third voting, should give also a casting vote. In the contingency, which would seldom arise, where, with the *arbiter's* double vote, there would still be a "tie," owing to the loss of a vote for the other person or persons, the result should be determined,

firstly, by priority in registration as a voter, and in the second instance by seniority in age.

12. On the day appointed for the nomination of "Members," which should not be less than ten days from the declaration of the voting for "*electors*," the electors should attend in person the place appointed to hear the nomination of candidates. If the majority of the declared electors should then agree as to the fit and proper Member or Members to represent the constituency, the election could then take place, but if desired it should be postponed for consideration not more than three days from that time. Those electors who should be absolutely unable to attend should be required to forward their voting papers, duly filled up and witnessed by two voters or electors, under a penalty of £5 for non-compliance, which fine should go towards the expenses of the constituency.

13. The *electors* should be allowed to vote for as many Members as the writ required for the constituency.

14. The election of Members should take place by papers, which should not require a witness if filled up personally in the building, and personally handed to the returning officer.

15. As soon as the auditors should have scrutinised the papers and ascertained the validity of the result, it should be made known publicly by the sheriff or returning officer, without delay.

16. In the event of there being a "tie" for two or more candidates, the one with the highest number in his favour should at once be declared "Member," and for the other or others the election should be proceeded with separately. If on the second appeal no result followed, they should be required to elect from among themselves an "*arbiter*," who should be privileged to give a casting vote for the Member. Such process to be gone through for each Member required.

If the votes for arbiters should "tie," seniority, firstly as an elector, secondly as a voter, and thirdly in years, would in rotation decide upon the "arbiter" to act.

17. The voting papers to be kept secret by the returning officer or sheriff, and if convicted of disclosing their contents he should be liable to a fine of £50, or three months imprisonment.

18. The Members should be elected free of expense to themselves.

19. There should be a Government Inspector of constituencies appointed, to whom should be forwarded by the sheriff the election papers for his supervision. It should be the duty of this inspector to report yearly to Parliament the state of the constituencies, with any information which might be deemed necessary for the Government to know, and to furnish such other reports as Parliament might require.

Such is the most radical and the most conservative plan of national suffrage which has yet been submitted to the public. It combines and harmonises two opposing elements, and two opposite extremes. While plenished with good, it has no mischievous alloy. It is widened to embrace everyone who can legitimately claim a vote; and yet it is deprived of the elements which make it obnoxious to the intelligence and patriotism, and dangerous to the welfare and stability of the State. It secures full and impartial representation for all, and may be made a mighty engine of good and safe government. The best voice of the country is obtained by it. The cream of the opinion of the country is taken and thoroughly expressed in a clearer manner than it can be by any other plan. All the advantages of the ballot are involved in it. There is hardly foothold for bribery and corruption. Party passions would in a great measure be allayed, and the violence, hatreds, and prejudices which are now aroused at election

times, under this simple system would find very little scope for activity. It would soften the exacerbation of political feeling, temper the fervour of opinion, and concentrate the essence of the better voice of the country. The more crucially it shall be examined, the more will it be seen to offer a complete solution to one of the most difficult problems of the day; the more will it be seen to meet a growing requirement of the age, and be found to be a herald of peace, happiness, contentment, and good government to the country. It would powerfully tend to elevate the moral condition of the people, and would give civilization a vigorous impulse. The Throne, if true to itself, and faithfully fulfilling its high mission, would be more firmly established; and Great Britain, by adopting it, would take a huge stride in the path of progress and rational social development, and would offer such a powerful example of good and solid government to other nations, that they would speedily desire to follow in the same course, base their institutions on the same firm foundation; and this little island home of freedom and enlightenment would give an additional title to the respect and gratitude of the world.

It certainly offers sufficient presumptive advantage to merit the appointment of a Parliamentary Committee to investigate its practicability and the suggested mode of carrying it out.

Your personal opinions upon the plan, coupled with a candid statement of any seeming difficulties in giving it effect, would assist its progress, if addressed to the author, Nightingale Grove, near Southampton; or, Alderman Bowman, Southampton.

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